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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000672

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: BEHIND VIETNAM'S LATEST CRACKDOWN

REF: A) HANOI 633 B) HO CHI MINH 473 C) HANOI 623

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Classified By: Ambassador Michael M. Michalak for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The recent arrests of several pro-democracy activists and a prominent lawyer, coupled with a tightening on the press and blogs, clearly represent a serious move against freedom of expression and association. What is less clear is the motivation. Well-placed contacts discount speculation that the crackdown is connected to political jockeying in advance of the 2011 Party Congress. Instead, there appears to have been a consensus in favor of tough action against the regime's perceived opponents. The arrests were sanctioned by the Politburo, our contacts report, in full awareness of the possible repercussions for Vietnam's relations with the United States and others. This calculation was sharpened by nationalist criticism of plans to mine bauxite in the Central Highlands, a perceived sense of economic vulnerability, and growing popular anger about corruption. The decision was made easier by the absence of any looming summits or significant carrots, such as WTO accession. Of lesser but still significant import, major changes in the leadership of the Ministry of Public Security will likely -- at least in the short run -- result in tougher policies as aspirants to newly vacant positions try to prove their metal. End summary.

A Politburo Decision

12. (C) The recent crackdown, particularly the arrest of prominent lawyer Le Cong Dinh (refs A and B), is a real step backward for freedom of expression and association in Vietnam. Dinh is a successful, mainstream lawyer -- a member of the establishment -- and for many elites, his arrest is a disturbing move. HCMC Deputy People's Committee Chairman Nguyen Trung Tin (protect), for example, told CG privately that Dinh's arrest is an "embarrassment to Vietnam," adding that people in HCMC are shocked and saddened about the treatment he has received. In discussions with the Ambassador, VFM Pham Binh Minh insisted that the recent spate of arrests was due to the individuals' connections to Viet Tan, an exile-based political party described by the GVN as a terrorist organization. But perhaps just as damning as Dinh's (extremely tenuous) contact with Viet Tan -- or his legal defense of dissidents -- is the fact that several of those arrested with him were involved with the blog "Change We Need," which reported on alleged corruption within the family of Prime Minister Dung, particularly the business

dealings of his children. Prominent journalist and blogger Huy Duc is also rumored to be facing imminent arrest for posting a piece linking the Prime Minister's in-laws to criminal activities.

13. (C) Nevertheless, the timing of the arrests, in some cases years after the "crimes" were committed, raises questions about the motives behind the crackdown. Prominent dissident and former Party member Pham Hong Son (protect) told the Ambassador July 9 he believed sensitivity over the bauxite issue was a major factor. The National Assembly recently concluded its first session of the year, in which a highly charged -- and unusually open -- public debate over plans to develop bauxite in the Central Highlands put the leadership on the defensive. The concerns raised by National Assembly Deputies continue to be echoed by an array of prominent figures from General Vo Nguyen Giap to Catholic Cardinal Pham Minh Man, and bloggers have circulated rumors that Prime Minister Dung, among others, had received large bribes from Chinese officials in exchange for supporting the project. Le Cong Dinh had added his voice to the bauxite protests, but did so in a way that Party elders may have found "disrespectful," particularly coming from a younger member of the establishment, according to contacts connected to prominent reformers.

14. (C) According to well-connected Party members, the arrests of Le Cong Dinh and others were sanctioned by the Politburo. The MFA's DG for International Organizations, Le Hoai Trung (protect), told the DCM that high-ranking Politburo members, including the Prime Minister, acknowledged that the arrests would have repercussions for Vietnam's foreign relations, bilateral ties with the United States in particular, but decided to proceed anyway. DG Trung asserted

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that "national security" concerns, exaggerated though they may seem from a Western perspective, dictated the decision. (Comment: The leadership sees national security and regime stability as synonymous. End comment.) The Politburo was particularly exercised, Trung suggested, by Le Cong Dinh's writing that "the time to act is now in 2009 and 2010 while Vietnam is vulnerable because of the economic crisis." Even more disturbingly, Trung said he had been present in a meeting when PM Dung noted that in order to avoid problems with the U.S., for the last two years MPS had not been arresting Vietnamese Americans intent on disrupting the GVN, but instead had simply deported them. "They have been taking advantage of this," Dung said, "and we need to act now."

Increasing Criticism Breeds Greater Sensitivity

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15. (C) The arrests have not come in a vacuum. Sensitivity over public criticism has been building over the last year. Over the course of 2008, some of Vietnam's most famous reporters were arrested for reporting on corruption cases such as the infamous "PMU 18 scandal." When editors from leading newspapers Tuoi Tre and Than Nien pushed back, they were forced out. Many other papers got the message and greatly reduced or eliminated entirely their investigative reporting.

16. (C) Blogs and bloggers are now coming under similar pressure. Last fall, the Ministry of Communication issued a new circular on blogs that limited blogs to publishing "personal information" only. The circular made it clear that anything resembling news or commentary on politics or current events requires a license and anyone publishing such information on their blog is therefore committing a crime. At first, bloggers took the new ruling almost as a joke, with numerous current events blogs published analyses on the new rule against news analyses. More recently, however, the GVN has begun singling out bloggers for harsher treatment. All four of the political activists arrested in the past few weeks were prominent bloggers. A fifth blogger, Huy Duc,

whose blog may well be the most widely read publication in Vietnam, informed us that he has been called in for "working sessions" with police and believes he will be arrested soon.

¶7. (C) The speed and tenaciousness with which Vietnam's bloggers latched onto a string of highly political -- and embarrassing for the GVN/CPV -- issues has most likely served to harden their stance. During the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, bloggers were instrumental in whipping up anti-Chinese sentiment that even resulted in protests in HCMC, much to the embarrassment of the GVN. Later, bloggers were equally vociferous in their denunciations of the arrest of reporters for reporting on the PMU 18 and others scandals.

But it is the effectiveness with which bloggers have tied together the otherwise disparate voices, some of them, such as General Giap, extremely prominent, protesting the GVN's plans to allow China to develop large bauxite mines in the Central Highlands that has been perhaps the most alarming. The fact that some bloggers went as far as to post rumors alleging that PM Dung, among others, had received large bribes from Chinese officials in exchange for supporting the project undoubtedly added to the level of official opprobrium toward blogs.

Not the Party Congress

¶8. (C) Most of the better-connected contacts with whom we have spoken discount the theory that the current crackdown is evidence of a proxy battle for senior leadership positions in anticipation of the 2011 Party Congress. There is little ideological distinction between the top contenders for Politburo posts and, it seems, remarkable consensus among the current Politburo membership that now is a suitable time for housecleaning. The Party Secretary of Can Tho, a member of the Central Committee, echoed the assessment of MFA DG Trung, adding that that all Central Committee members have been directed to study whether Vietnam is "perfecting" socialism or "regressing" into capitalism, an ominous sign that the CPV leadership considers moderates such as Le Cong Dinh to be a threat.

MPS Machinations may Play a Role

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¶9. (C) Nevertheless, bureaucratic factors may have played into the crackdown and exacerbated its effects. Within the Ministry of Public Security, the expected retirement of influential Vice Minister Lt. General Nguyen Van Huong may set off a scramble for influence. In the past, MPS has had seven vice ministers, all Central Committee members. Two of these positions were recently vacated -- Thi Van Tam (recently deceased) and Truong Hoa Binh, who rotated to become the Chief Judge of the Supreme People's Court. Should Huong retire, the upcoming Party Congress must find three replacements, complicating the leadership calculations at MPS and providing an incentive for aspirants to prove their credentials by advocating "tough" policies. Adding to the complicated picture is the fact that MPS Minister Le Hong Anh, said to be less influential than VM Huong, may not hold onto his position after the 2011 Congress.

Fewer External Constraints

¶10. (C) There are, meanwhile, no looming international events, such as a Presidential summit, that might constrain Vietnam's "securocrats" from continuing to crack down. One veteran Ambassador to Vietnam observed that the Ministry of Public Security and the rest of the security apparatus are ultimately answerable to the Party and can be reined in when Vietnam wants to demonstrate good behavior in pursuit of a goal such as WTO membership. With no such goal on the horizon and Vietnam's quadrennial Universal Periodic Review

of its human rights situation now over, the Ambassador observed, there is no incentive for the securocrats to hold back in cracking down on dissent.

11. (U) This cable has been coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City.
MICHALAK